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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001076

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YEARGER/GAVITO
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER MURR ON THE NEXT ARMY
COMMANDER AND THE JOINT MILITARY COMMISSION

Classified By: CDA William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUEST

¶1. (C) Please see action request in para 12. In a July 22 meeting, Defense Minister Elias Murr told Charge the decision on the next Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander is down to two names: LAF Intelligence Director BG Georges Khoury and 2nd Brigade Commander BG Jean Qahwaji. (Murr will advocate for Qahwaji.) Regarding the OSD level Joint Military Commission proposed 4-5 September 2008 visit, Murr told Charge it would be best to delay by three to four weeks to have the new LAF Commander in place, as well as his subordinate commanders. This way, the USG will have "buy in" from all of the new commanders rather than making agreements with outgoing commanders. In the interim, Murr invited Assistant Secretary of Defense Mary Beth Long back to Beirut for a "maintenance" visit in August. On the political front, Murr explained that he and his father have struck a strategic political alliance with former President Amine Gemayel to defeat Michel Aoun in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Murr characterized newly appointed Minister of the Interior Ziyad Baroud as weak. Murr noted to Charge that he was one of the few cabinet members not to attend the GOL welcoming ceremony for prisoners freed by Israel. End summary.

MURR: DELAY THE JMC
UNTIL THE END OF SEPTEMBER

¶2. (C) Charge Grant, accompanied by Defense Attache and ODC Chief, met with Minister of Defense Elias Murr at his residence in Rabieh on Tuesday, July 22 at 1:00 p.m. Charge delivered a proposal for an OSD Joint Military Commission (JMC) to be held in Beirut, Lebanon on 4-5 September 2008 between the USG and the GOL. Murr understood that the JMC proposal was an outgrowth of his discussions with Under Secretary for Defense Policy Eric Edelman regarding a Bilateral Defense Committee (BDC) and that the JMC would henceforth be the vehicle for these discussions. Murr, reading the entire proposal on the spot, said he accepted.

¶3. (C) However, Murr said that it was not the right time to "fix the date" for the JMC. He preferred to have a new Army Commander in place, along with a new Army Staff, before the JMC, arguing that it is better to negotiate/plan with the new LAF leadership rather than get promises from men who are on the doorstep of retirement. Murr was very supportive of

including the Lebanese Ambassador to Washington, Anthony Chedid, as well as the LAF Defense Attache in Washington. By Murr's estimation, wide sharing of this program, and including more people in its formulation, will engender a greater sense of ownership, support, and active participation by all sides. When pressed, Murr told us that it is possible that the new LAF leadership could be in place and prepared for a JMC by the end of September.

14. (C) In the meantime, Murr extended an invitation for ASD Mary Beth Long to return to Beirut in August to continue the strategic level discussions and to frame the context of the JMC. Murr likened this to a "maintenance visit" in order to maintain momentum saying, "a visit like this would be very helpful." He will be in the U.S. for a private visit October 13-19 and is interested in meetings in Washington during the week before, October 7-12.

THE NEXT LAF COMMANDER
AND THE NEW LAF LEADERSHIP

15. (C) Murr told Charge that the field of candidates for LAF Commander had narrowed to two: LAF G-2 Intelligence Director BG Georges Khoury and 2nd Infantry Brigade Commander BG Jean Qahwaji. Murr said LAF G-4 Logistics Officer Georges Massad was no longer in the running, as he would only have two years before retirement. LAF South of the Litani Commander BG Boulous Mattar is also out of the running due to medical difficulties, he added.

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16. (C) According to Murr, Maronite Patriarch Boutrous Sfeir is advocating for Khoury to be the next LAF Commander. Murr stated that Hizballah and Syria, as well as PM Siniora, support Khoury as well. (Note: In a separate meeting with Charge the same day, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt also expressed his support for Khoury. End note.) Murr said, "From our side, we want Qahwaji, but we don't want to burn him." Murr stressed that all discussions on the next LAF Commander are being held in the utmost secrecy as everyone understands how important this appointment is in comparison to the recent cabinet formation.

17. (C) Murr expressed confidence that he would be able to shift the momentum towards Qahwaji to become the next LAF Commander by using President Michel Sleiman. According to Murr, he discussed this issue with Sleiman during their last meeting and Sleiman favors Qahwaji. Murr told us that March 14 leader Saad Hariri also is supportive of Qahwaji. Meanwhile, Murr assesses that Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri and Hizballah will oppose Qahwaji, but "hopefully, they will not say too much."

18. (C) Murr said he intends to corner Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun by forcing Aoun to support Qahwaji in the face of Hizballah. Qahwaji was on the front lines defending Aoun when Aoun left the presidency at the end of the Lebanese Civil War. For Aoun to not back Qahwaji would be viewed as a betrayal by Aoun of the officer corps for personal political gain. In the end, Murr does not think the Patriarch will back Khoury as the Patriarch has someone else in mind: Non-Commissioned Officer Academy Commander BG Charbel Barq.

19. (C) The process for selecting the next LAF Commander will begin after the cabinet completes its ministerial statement and parliament gives it a vote of confidence. Murr said that the Speaker of Parliament must wait forty-eight hours after receiving the ministerial statement to convene parliament, which he expects will occur near the end of July. He then expects the first cabinet meeting to be held around the first of August and the second on August 15. Murr believed the LAF Commander nomination would most likely be deferred until the second cabinet meeting.

¶10. (C) Once the new LAF Commander is chosen, Murr intends to work with him to devise a rotation plan for all of the officers. Murr already is focusing on the appointment of the eleven new infantry brigade commanders and the eight "special forces regiment" commanders. (Comment: Murr is including the Intervention Regiments in his calculations. End Comment.) Murr told us that the LAF needs "a positive shock" to help it improve. Since there is no combat on the horizon to force change in the Army, Murr intends to shock the system by announcing 100 percent of all Army command positions on the same day to include all of the brigade commanders, regimental commanders and commanders for the 66 tactical level battalions.

¶11. (C) Murr told us dispassionately that he is compelled to get the new LAF command structure into place quickly as his enemies may try to kill him before he completes this task. As Minister of Defense, he either directly appoints officers (such as battalion commanders) or oversees their appointment through the Military Council. The Military Council is headed by a Druze, is directly linked to the Ministry of Defense, and can act independently of the Army Commander. (Note: The Military Council was created in 1979 as a counter-balance to the power of the Maronite Army Commander. Note.)

MURR REQUESTS GUIDANCE ON
ATTACK HELICOPTER MATRIX

¶12. (C) Murr plans to visit Saudi Arabia next month. King Abdullah will be back in Riyadh on August 15 and is ready to receive him to discuss financing of attack helicopters for the LAF. Murr requested guidance from the USG on the attack helicopter matrix prior to August 20 for use in these discussions. ACTION REQUEST: We request Department consult with DOD on this issue and provide us answer we can provide to Murr.

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SAMIR KINTAR RECEPTION:
NEITHER I, NOR MY FATHER, ATTENDED

¶13. (C) Charge said that the USG was dismayed at the reception of Samir Kintar by the government and majority of the Lebanese political leadership on July 16. Murr said he could not explain it, but he was very forceful when he said, "I was not there, or my father." Cabinet ministers, including Elias Murr, and MPs, including his father Michel, had been invited to the ceremony.

THE NEW MINISTER OF INTERIOR
IS A VERY WEAK MAN

¶14. (C) Murr dubbed new Minister of Interior, Ziyad Baroud, as "very Jesuit," following the strictest traditions of the Freres de Kaslik, which, according to Murr, include the most xenophobic interpretations of Maronite prerogatives in Lebanon. Murr said Baroud already is meeting with two opposition figures, Marada leader Suleiman Franjeh and Free Patriotic Movement Gebran Bassil, on a regular basis. Murr does not expect that Baroud will be involved in the security aspects of the Interior Ministry as "he was not even allowed to pick his own staff. President Sleiman is picking his staff for him." As a career technocrat who once served as Murr's law professor, Baroud will not do anything to make people angry with him, Murr predicted. "He is a weak man and I do not like weak men," he added.

RAPPROCHEMENT WITH AMINE GEMAYEL

¶15. (C) In closing, Murr said rumors of an alliance with Amine Gemayel's Kataeb party and his father, Michel Murr, a

longtime political godfather, are true. Typically, Elias Murr claimed credit for initiating the improvement of the relationship between the old political rivals. It started with Elias Murr's conversation with Gemayal at the wedding of President Sleiman's daughter. Gemayel invited Michel Murr to dinner afterwards and the two struck a pact to fight against Michel Aoun in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Murr warned Gemayel to keep his son Sami in line and to keep him from seeking secret liaisons with Michel Aoun as this process moves forward or the alliance will be annulled. Elias Murr believes Sami can be controlled by his father, especially since everyone understands that the next round of parliamentary elections will set the political course of Lebanon for the next twenty years. (Note: Sami was among the protesters at Baabda Palace during Syrian FM Moallem's visit demanding the release of Lebanese detainees in Syria. End note.)

GRANT